

# Third Culture Kids

Third-culture kids (TCKs) are those who have spent some of their growing up years in a foreign country and experience a sense of not belonging to their passport country when they return to it. In adapting to life in a 'foreign' country they have also missed learning ways of their homeland and feel most at home in the 'third-culture' which they have created. Little understood by American schools, where they are often considered an oddity, what third culture kids want most is to be accepted as the individuals they are.

Ruth Hill Useem first coined the term 40 years ago in India. She and subsequent others found that TCKs cope rather than adjust, becoming both "a part of" and "apart from" whatever situation they are in.<sup>1</sup> Mobile kids tend to have more in common with each other than with their American peers who have not had internationally mobile experiences. The family and international peer group has played a large role in their formation setting them apart when they return to the U.S. The search and establishment of a unique identity, Erik Erikson's task for adolescents, may become blurred when the environment changes dramatically upon return. Internationally mobile teens often need longer to establish a secure identity as the American peer group does not match the image TCKs had overseas.

Adults encountering these kids can assist their transitions by creating comfortable environments within peer groups where they can share their concerns with others and realize that what they are experiencing is normal. Opportunities to reinforce good decision making skills are also helpful.

While overseas, they have lived in a fishbowl environment where decisions are made by the employer/authority, and the repercussions for risk-taking behavior are more severe. Teens have a smaller view of career opportunities in their overseas community and often are older than their American peers before deciding on a career. Problems in interpersonal relationships are more likely to be left behind during a move than resolved, depriving TCKs of 'practice' in a very important life skill. Organizations such as Around the World in A Lifetime (AWAL) in Washington and at some overseas posts provide the setting for TCKs to discuss and process their valuable history and devise strategies for 'coping' with life as an American youth.

Resources to share with teens and their parents include:

Eakin, Kay Branaman. *According to My Passport, I'm Coming Home*. Washington D.C., Family Liaison Office, 1999.

McClusky, Karen Curnow, Ed. *Notes from a Traveling Childhood*. Washington D.C., Foreign Service Youth Foundation, 1994.

Pollock, David C. and Ruth E. Van Reken. *The Third Culture Kid Experience*. Yarmouth, ME, Intercultural Press, 1999.

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<sup>1</sup> Eakin, Kay B. [According to My Passport, I'm Coming Home](#). P 18.

Taber, Sara Mansfield. *Of Many Lands: Journal of a Traveling Childhood*. Washington D.C. Foreign Service Youth Foundation, 1997.